

The Best Man

by Mrs Weasley

Category: Harry Potter

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2000-05-13 09:00:00

Updated: 2001-01-30 09:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 17:43:18

Rating: K

Chapters: 7

Words: 21,463

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Eight years after leaving Hogwarts, Harry's friends assemble for his wedding, but, with old quarrels and new dangers surfacing, will the wedding take place as planned?

1. Default Chapter Title

Summary: Eight years after leaving Hogwarts, Harry's friends assemble for his wedding, but, with old quarrels and new dangers surfacing, will the wedding take place as planned?

Disclaimer: These characters belong to JK Rowling, except for a couple I've added.

Author's Notes: I'm a bit out of practice at writing HP fanfic, Real Life has been too busy lately. If you have read my other stories "Sixth Year Showdowns", "The Gift", "The Siren and the Spy" or "My Friend Ron", (What? You haven't? Please do!) you will know that I lean towards R/H shippiness but I don't write slush. This story is an experiment - as you will see, different chapters are written from different characters' viewpoints. Harry first!

This story has seven chapters:

1. Harry 2. Hermione 3. Ron 4. The Party 5. The Danger. 6. The Long Night 7. The Dawn.

Part 1: Harry

Harry Potter couldn't help wondering if the Muggle inhabitants of Ottery St Catchpole had noticed any unusual activity in the last few days. He knew that men weren't supposed to understand these things, but he still couldn't believe the amount of preparation that seemed to be needed for a wedding. Or, at least, the sort of wedding Mrs. Weasley was organizing for them. So many people milling around - so many things to buy or conjure up - planning the food, the entertainment, the decorations, the clothes - there was just so much to do. Finding places in the village for the guests to stay overnight

had been one headache, but luckily there were several friendly wizarding families who had known the Weasleys for years and were only too happy to help out.

But, with only two days to go, most of the planning was done and everyone was taking a breather and welcoming the arrival of the first guests. Harry thought, as he opened the garden gate of The Burrow and waited politely for Mrs. Weasley to go out first, that the best part of the whole business was going to be - well, OK, naturally the best part was the actually getting married part - but a close second was going to be the pleasure of seeing all his old friends together in one place for the first time in a very long time.

He didn't think they'd all been gathered like this since Hogwarts. Eight years. And it was six years, unbelievably, since he, Ron and Hermione had *all* been in the same place - not since The Big Break-Up, as Ginny still called it.

Not for the first time, Harry shook his head over that, as he followed Mrs. Weasley down the hill towards the village. She had suddenly decided that she needed some odds and ends from the shops before dinner, and Harry had politely offered to accompany her. Everyone else was busy with their own activities, and Harry had nothing in particular to do until Hermione arrived. She had sent an owl that morning to say she would set off from London at lunchtime, and expected to reach Ottery St Catchpole in the evening some time. He was looking forward to seeing her and catching up on all the news.

"I think if we get these things that will be everything we need for now," Mrs. Weasley mused as she re-read her shopping list. Harry was carrying her shopping basket, and had to slow down to keep pace with her. He was much taller and his stride was longer. Mrs. Weasley was chatting away to him as they got closer to the village, but Harry didn't hear much of what she said, as he became absorbed in his thoughts.

Harry's thoughts were preoccupied with his two best schoolfriends. He had been determined that both Ron and Hermione should come to the wedding, and Ginny had tried to reassure him that everything would be all right. "It's been six years," she had pointed out firmly. "They're not going to start throwing things at each other - anyway, Ron wouldn't dare - Mum would kill him if he ruined the wedding by causing a scene."

Harry supposed she was right. Anyway, both Ron and Hermione had cheerfully accepted their wedding invitations, so there hadn't been any difficulty so far. Hermione had even said that she was looking forward to seeing everyone, and Harry hoped that included Ron.

As he followed Mrs. Weasley from shop to shop, and waited patiently as she met friends and had long conversations with them, Harry thought back to the time when they had left Hogwarts, after the terrifying events of their seventh year had left them looking forward to a brighter future. Despite the loss of those who had died in that struggle against Voldemort's forces, those who survived had been determined to carry on. Ron had suggested that Harry should join him in training for Magical Law Enforcement. "You'd make a brilliant Enforcer," he had told Harry, but Harry had had enough of fighting and outwitting the forces of darkness for a while. The events of

their final term had left him sickened and depressed, even though they had "won". He missed all those who were dead, especially Dumbledore, Hagrid, and most of all Sirius. He wanted to do something more peaceful, where he didn't have to make life and death choices. So he had accepted two offers - first, to play Quidditch for the Hogsmeade Hurricanes, and second, to write a Quidditch column for the "Daily Prophet". He thought he had been pretty successful with both his jobs, and he still enjoyed them.

Harry was roused from his thoughts by Mrs. Weasley's exclamation.

"My goodness! I didn't realise how late it was - I'm sorry Harry dear, I've been rattling on and if we don't hurry dinner will be late and we'll miss Hermione arriving. Come along!"

Harry grinned as he followed her.

As they climbed the hill and neared the gate of The Burrow, Mrs. Weasley said, "I'm looking forward so much to seeing Hermione. It seems like such a long time since she's been here - not since, well, since Bill -" Her voice tailed away for a moment, then she continued, forcing brightness back into her voice, "And she's done so well for herself!"

"Yes, she has," Harry agreed.

"It's a pity she and Ron never made up that quarrel - but I hope they'll be friendly this weekend, with the wedding and everything -"

"Don't worry, I'm sure everything will be all right."

Harry thought of the time he had spent six years ago trying to bring about a reconcilliation between his two friends, before giving up. Remus Lupin had said to him then, "People change, Harry. You're not kids any more. You can't bring people together if it's not what they want." And Harry had reluctantly agreed. Anyway, he still saw plenty of Ron, and Hermione fairly often too, until recently, when she had been so busy with her work. It was just that the three of them were never all together - but this weekend would be different, he hoped.

As Harry went into the house behind Mrs. Weasley, he was wondering if Ginny and Susan had returned yet, and whether he would just have time to finish his latest column and send it off by owl before dinner. It was the last one he was going to write before the start of the leave he had taken for the wedding and honeymoon. He was so busy thinking about these things that he did not notice he was being watched. Behind a nearby hedge, two figures were concealed, and as the door of The Burrow closed, a voice was saying -

"I told you. They're all so busy with the wedding, they'll never expect anything to happen. This is the perfect opportunity."

"Are you sure you know the timings?"

"Positive. Granger will be here tonight. And Weasley will be here tomorrow. I checked with my contact who's working for the caterers. There's a party tomorrow night, before the wedding. That will be our

chance."

"I hope the plan will work - after all, it **is** Harry Potter we're dealing with -"

"Relax! I told you - he knows nothing about what's happening in Dark Arts circles these days. He's turned his back on saving the world since Black and the rest of them died. All he's interested in these days is Quidditch and his girlfriend. It's Weasley we've got to be careful about - he's an Enforcer, and could be suspicious of us."

"Yes, sir."

"By the time we've finished with them, Potter and his friends are going to wish they'd never come here."

End of Part 1. Coming soon; Part 2. Hermione's thoughts as she travels to the wedding.

2. Default Chapter Title

Summary: Hermione takes stock of her life as she travels to the wedding.

Disclaimer: These characters belong to JK Rowling, except for a couple I've added.

Author's Notes: For those who like "action", most of it is in parts 4,5,6 and 7! This story has seven chapters:

1. Harry 2. Hermione 3. Ron 4. The Party 5. The Danger. 6. The Long Night 7. The Dawn.

Part 2: Hermione.

Hermione Granger sipped coffee and looked at her watch. She liked driving - she liked the private thinking time it gave her. She had made good time from London, and when twilight came she had been near a good pub she knew of, just off the motorway in Somerset, and she had stopped for a meal and a break. The rest of the way to Ottery St Catchpole was an easy journey - another hour would see her there. She looked around the pub's dining room, listening to the buzz of Muggles socialising and eating, and wondered what they would say if they knew who she was and what kind of people she was going to spend the weekend with.

After paying her bill, Hermione walked out into the car park and unlocked her car. It was small, but handy for driving in London. A taller person might have found it rather cramped - Ron, for instance, she thought wryly as she sniffed the evening air before getting in. It was a long time since she had passed this way, and it was nice to be in the countryside again, smelling trees and grass instead of exhaust fumes.

As she turned back on to the road, Hermione was looking forward to catching up with old friends. It was only eight years since she had left Hogwarts, but it seemed longer. A lot had happened. When she had left school, Professor McGonagall - grim-faced, taking her new duties

as Headmistress very seriously - had urged her to come and teach Transfiguration, but Hermione had declined. Partly, because she wanted to see a little more of the world, before settling back into a small community like a school. And partly, because she needed time to remember happier days at Hogwarts, and to try to forget the recent sadder memories - Dumbledore, facing up to Voldemort in that final showdown - Hagrid's look of bewilderment that day when they found him dead in front of his cottage - Sirius's look of desperate determination as he made that final sacrifice for Harry...Hermione gave a little shiver as she remembered.

So she hadn't taken McGonagall's job offer. She had done some research, done some travelling, and found out a lot about subjects which interested her. "You know stacks about all this," Harry had said admiringly, one day in the Leaky Cauldron as she was telling him and Ron about her latest discoveries about ancient curses. "You should write a book about it."

"Mm. I suppose I could," Hermione had agreed. So she had, writing bits now and again when she had nothing else to do. But then she had gone through a bad time - Bill's death had hit them all hard, and after the...quarrel...when Ron wasn't around any more, she had plunged into writing seriously as a way of trying to forget things she didn't want to remember. When the book was finished, she had shown the manuscript to her old acquaintance Seamus Finnigan, who now worked for a publishing company. To her surprise, the book had been snapped up, and had sold very well. The second book had done even better, and Professor McGonagall had asked her if they could use it as a textbook at Hogwarts. The last six years had been very busy. Hermione had done a good deal more travelling as well, gathering information. Last week she had had lunch with Seamus, discussing her plans for writing a book about her visit to a wizarding community in Russia where special transfiguration skills were passed down by families.

"Sounds great," Seamus had said enthusiastically. "The last one's selling like hot cakes. Do you know, you're our second bestselling author now, after Gilderoy Lockhart?"

Hermione had pulled a face. "Seamus, please! You're not comparing me to that egotistical fantasist, I hope." And that was a polite name for him, she thought.

"Hardly," Seamus had grinned. "For one thing, your books aren't fiction! For another, he was mad for publicity and you can't stand it. You don't even let us put your photo on the covers. Won't you just do a book-signing session for us at Flourish and Blotts some time?"

"No, Seamus," Hermione had said firmly. "I'm happy that people are buying the books, but I would hate to be recognised in the street. I like being able to get on with my life in peace."

"OK, fine," Seamus had given in. "So - how about the wedding next week? I'm hoping to get down there on the day itself. I assume you'll be there?"

"Oh yes," Hermione had said. "I'm going down two days before."

"There'll be lots of old faces there. I expect - um - Ron's going to be the best man, is he?"

"Yes, I think so," Hermione had said, her voice deliberately casual. "I'm going to be an attendant. Not a bridesmaid - I said I wasn't wearing a frilly dress for anyone's sake."

Seamus had laughed at the thought.

Darkness was falling fast now, and the only lights were those of other cars, and occasional houses. Hermione was driving through Devon countryside, recognising landmarks she hadn't seen for a long time. She'd seen Harry a few weeks earlier, when he had come to see her and tell her some details of the wedding plans. He'd been full of enthusiasm at the idea of a great get-together, and she had sighed at his obvious eagerness for everyone to be good friends, just like at school. Of course, she thought, they would all behave in a civilized way, but Harry couldn't really expect them all to be unchanged. Too much had happened, too much had been experienced to leave them untouched.

Still, she couldn't pretend that she wasn't interested to see how everyone had changed, and how they were all getting on. She had run into Lavender Brown in Diagon Alley the other day, and had hardly recognized her. Seamus, on the other hand, looked at twenty-six very much as he had done at eighteen, his boyish face still round and eager. She had told Harry about how Seamus badgered her to make public appearances, and he had casually told her how much Ron was enjoying his work. She imagined Ron might have changed in six years - especially dashing around the way he did - or maybe he was still the same. Harry always dropped little titbits of Ron information into the conversation when he met up with Hermione, and she was sure he did it on purpose, still hoping he could cancel out six years' worth of estrangement.

She wondered what differences they would see in her.

The light from her headlights caught the road sign; Ottery St Catchpole, 1 mile. With these high, dark hedges it was hard to see anything on the narrow lane, so she slowed to a cautious speed. She wondered if her neighbour had remembered to feed Crookshanks. She was sure Crookshanks would have found some way of ensuring he was not forgotten. Hermione prized the privacy of her small flat which she shared with Crookshanks alone. For most of the last three years she had been involved in a relationship with Stephen, a fellow writer she had met through having the same publisher. But she had never felt close enough to him to want to live with him all the time, to share the privacy of her flat with him - and their relationship had finally ended amicably a few months ago. She had decided that he wasn't the right person - but, in the back of her mind, part of her had always known that it wasn't going to work out.

The sprawling rooftops and crooked chimneys of The Burrow loomed out of the darkness. There were already several vehicles parked in the darkened yard - Hermione recognized a battered scarlet sports car as Fred's. "I can't believe that car's still running," she thought to herself as she parked.

The door of the house opened, and light spilled out. The sound of her car's engine had obviously been heard. Hermione waved to the people

in the doorway, but went back to close the gate first. As she did so, she saw a piece of paper on the ground and stooped to pick it up. She frowned in mystification. It appeared to be a sketch map - and as she peered at it in the light from the house, she realised it was a sketch map of the grounds of The Burrow. The house, the doors, the paths and outbuildings were all marked on it. She shrugged. Perhaps one of the people arranging the wedding reception had dropped it. They might need a plan. She turned at the sound of Harry's voice, stuffing the paper into her coat pocket.

"Hermione! You made it!" He hugged her, looking down affectionately, beaming. "Did you have a good journey?"

"Fine - hardly any traffic really."

"Hermione!" Mrs. Weasley was hugging her now, shorter than she was. "It's lovely to see you after all this time." She held Hermione off and looked at her appraisingly, noticing her neatly bobbed hair, nut-brown tailored trousers and jacket. "You look very smart."

"I had a meeting with my publisher this morning," Hermione explained. "I had to smarten up a bit."

They had reached the kitchen. "But you're too thin and pale," Mrs. Weasley scolded her.

"She looks fine, Mum," Ginny said, bending to kiss Hermione. "She's just slim. I like your hair that short, by the way," she added to Hermione.

Mrs. Weasley shook her head. "It's not healthy living in London. We'll have to feed you up while you're here."

"Well, if I am pale I expect it's because I've been holed up in my flat finishing a book," said Hermione. "I'm looking forward to getting some fresh air here." More people came into the kitchen to greet her - Charlie, and his wife Susan.

"You must have been very busy, getting ready for the wedding," Hermione said to Harry later, as he showed her to the room she was staying in.

"It's been chaos," Harry assured her as they climbed the narrow stairs. "Aunt Molly's been buzzing round like a very active bee - but she loves organizing things like this. Charlie says she was frustrated when he and Susan got married in Germany and didn't give her a chance to throw a party." He grinned, as he pushed open the door of the little room. "I can't honestly say I've been much help - I've just been keeping out of the way."

"Thanks, Harry," Hermione said, as he put her suitcase down on the floor. "I'm a bit tired after all that driving - I'd better try to get a good night's sleep, I'm sure there'll be a lot going on tomorrow."

"Yeah - the party in the evening, and we have to go and pick up some of the clothes. And Ron's coming tomorrow, you know," Harry added, as he went to leave.

"Mm," was Hermione's only reply. She suddenly felt very tired, and

the small bed looked invitingly cosy. She walked to the window and drew aside the curtain, looking out. After the lights of London, where it was never really dark, the country night looked very black, but the stars were bright. She was just about to turn away from the window when she thought she saw a sudden flicker of yellow light just across the field from the Weasleys' home - like someone lighting a cigarette or a small lamp? But the light quickly vanished again, and she couldn't be sure exactly where she had seen it.

Hermione shrugged, and started to get ready for bed, trying not to think too hard about the possible stresses and strains of the next day. Coming face to face with Ron after six years wasn't going to be the easiest thing she had ever done.

End of Part 2. Coming soon in Part 3, Ron's POV, and more hints of mystery - I hope!

3. Default Chapter Title

Summary: Before he travels to the wedding, Ron gets a warning...

Disclaimer: These characters belong to JK Rowling, except for a couple I've added.

Author's Notes: For those who like "action", most of it is in parts 4,5,6 and 7! This story has seven chapters:

1. Harry 2. Hermione 3. Ron 4. The Party 5. The Danger. 6. The Long Night. 7. The Dawn.

Part 3: Ron.

Ronald Weasley knocked on the door marked "C.E.O." and waited for an answer, checking his watch as he did so.

"Come in."

Ron opened the door, and saw his boss sitting in the familiar black leather chair behind the imposing oak desk, which was cluttered with files as usual. "Ah, Ron, you're back, good. Take a seat." Ron folded his tall frame into another leather chair. "How did it go in Wales, then?"

"Fine, sir. No problem." A ghost of a reminiscent grin spread across Ron's lean, freckled face. "They were pretty horrified when we turned up - they weren't expecting us at all. Three arrests, and the rest we just cautioned - I think we got all their dragon eggs, and nestlings - they were shocked enough not to try it again, I reckon."

"Excellent. The Minister will be pleased it was all sorted out so quickly."

Ron shrugged. "I'm sure the Minister's got more on his mind than a spot of illegal dragon-fighting being organized in North Wales."

"Quite. In fact, I was speaking to the Minister's office this morning

- to your brother Percy, actually." The Chief Enforcement Officer frowned. "Some of our sources have been reporting information about a rise in Dark Arts activity. That's why I wanted to see you."

"Me? Um - you haven't forgotten I'm off this weekend, sir? My sister's wedding -"

"No, no, I hadn't forgotten. How could I, when such illustrious persons are involved?" The C.E.O. smiled. "But, as it happens, you may be in the right place at the right time. Your family live in Devon, don't they?"

"Yes, Ottery St Catchpole," Ron said, looking rather surprised at all this interest. "Near Honiton."

"Exactly. And my sources tell me there has been an unusual amount of activity in that area. Several persons we thought were lying low, have been seen down that way during the last few days. These people." The C.E.O. pulled a list from his desk drawer and passed it to Ron, whose eyebrows rose as he read it. "And, of course, there may be others we haven't spotted."

"You think they're planning something to coincide with the wedding?" Ron asked slowly, looking concerned.

"Well, we can't be sure - it may just be coincidence - but you and I both know a lot of well-known people will be at that wedding. Maybe someone has found it too tempting a target."

Ron nodded.

"Of course, there may be nothing in it. It's a popular part of the world for wizarding folk who want to live a quiet life, after all. But I thought you should know, so that you can keep your eyes and ears open."

"Are you going to send down a squad, sir - in case?"

"Not to the wedding - don't want to be too high-profile about it. But I'm going to station a squad in Exeter, and you can call them in if you think it's necessary. Pick your own team. We've not got much else on at the moment."

Ron nodded again.

"Well, I think that's all, Ron. Enjoy your weekend - I hope the wedding goes well."

"So do I!" Ron murmured as he unfolded himself from the chair.

Half an hour later, having made the necessary arrangements and cleared his desk, Ron jogged down the steps of the main building occupied by the Magical Law Enforcement Squad. He saw a patrol of four Hit Wizards trudging exhaustedly towards the building, eyes red-rimmed. "Rough night, guys?"

"You can say that again," one woman muttered. "Chasing a manticore some damnfool wizard let escape into the middle of Coventry city centre. Caused a five-car pile-up on the ring road. Had to call in the Accidental Magic Reversal Department and do fifty-four Memory

Charms. It was a mess."

"Where you off to, Ron?" another wizard asked.

"Weekend off," said Ron cheerfully, kicking the prop from under his motorbike and climbing on.

"Jammy git!" they shouted after him good-humouredly, as the bike roared out of the car park.

Another half-hour later, and Ron was stuffing his weekend gear into a rucksack in the cramped flat he shared with one of his colleagues. When the phone rang, he threw the rucksack on to the sofa, which was littered with dirty socks, old newspapers and take-away food cartons, and went in search of the phone, which he found on top of the fridge.

"Hullo? Oh, hi Mum...Yeah, I'm just leaving to go to Paddington...No, don't worry, I won't miss it!...I've got loads of time...Have you picked up my suit yet?...O.K...Yeah...See you later then. Bye."

The last thing he did before leaving the flat was to scribble a note to his flatmate and stick it on the front of the fridge, where hopefully it wouldn't be missed. "Dean - I've left the bike out in the yard - please keep an eye on it. See you Tuesday I expect. R."

Having plenty of time before his train left, Ron preferred to take the Tube to Paddington Station. He could have got there quicker using Floo Powder, or simply by Apparating, but he had loved using the Muggle Tube since he had first discovered it as a teenager, and the M.L.E.S. frowned on its agents risking being seen Apparating in crowded railway stations. So Ron sat on the jolting Tube, his rucksack on his lap, and thought about his trip home for the weekend, and the wedding. He still thought of The Burrow as his home. The flat was not homely - it was merely a place to crash in between assignments, somewhere to sleep, shower, shave and change before going out again. Ron tried to go and see his parents whenever his hectic schedule allowed. Mum and Dad had never really been the same, he thought, since Bill had died, and he remembered the events of six years before.

Two years had then passed after the final battle against Voldemort at Hogwarts, and the Gringotts goblins had decided with the Ministry of Magic that they should open any old bank vaults belonging to Dark Arts wizards who had died in that struggle. Their possessions were to be confiscated by the Ministry. However, the goblins had found that some of the vaults had had curses left on them by their previous owners. As Gringotts' top curse-breaker, Bill Weasley had been called in to try to open them. Tragically, not until he entered it did Bill discover that one vault was fatally booby-trapped. Not just Bill but several Gringotts goblins had died instantly, and a whole tunnel full of vaults had been completely destroyed. Bill, of course, had known the risks involved in his job, but that thought had not been of much comfort to his grieving family. At least, Mrs. Weasley had sobbed, he hadn't had a wife and children to miss him as well.

Ron had felt very bitter over Bill's death. It seemed so ironic that it should come just when they were all feeling a new sense of security after that seventh-year battle against Voldemort. Just when

they were beginning to recover from the losses they had sustained then - Dumbledore, Hagrid, Sirius and the others. True, there were still plenty of Dark Wizards around - not all their enemies had been defeated - but the Gringotts explosion had been worse for being such an unexpected blow. Ron had been in a dark mood for months afterwards. It was in that mood that he had had that final, dreadful quarrel with Hermione - the quarrel they had both been too proud to make up. If she really wanted to make it up, he'd reasoned, she would make the first move. Only she didn't. And he didn't. And here they were, six years later, not having spoken to each other since then.

Work had been Ron's salvation during those difficult times. He loved his job, tough though it was sometimes. He was a fully-fledged Enforcer now, liable to be called out anywhere to cases of magical lawbreaking; and he enjoyed the challenge and the fact that every day was different. He'd tried several times to lure Harry away from his Quidditch column into the M.L.E.S., but Harry only laughed and said that he wanted a quiet life for a while - if playing top-level Quidditch could be considered quiet.

The Tube doors slid open. Paddington. Ron shouldered his rucksack and stepped on to the escalator. Hard to believe it was six years since he had spoken to Hermione. Harry was always mentioning things about her progress, but Ron knew a lot about what she'd been doing anyway; through mutual friends. He wondered what she would say if she knew he had bought all her books. It was difficult to avoid seeing her when they both lived in London, but then she was often away, on her research trips, and Ron was often away on M.L.E.S. business. On his rare days off he was more likely to be catching up on laundry or visiting The Burrow than to be hanging round Diagon Alley bumping into old friends.

He had seen her there once, in fact. Two years ago, he'd been walking down Diagon Alley when he had seen her coming out of Flourish and Blotts' with a tall fair man. Instinctively, Ron had ducked into Madam Malkin's robe shop and watched through the window. He needn't have dodged the meeting - they could just have nodded to each other - but... Anyway, she stood in the street outside, engrossed in talk, for ten minutes before moving away, and Ron was forced into asking Madam Malkin to measure him for new camouflage robes he didn't really need.

He knew who the tall fair man was, too. Stephen, the writer that Lavender Brown had prattled about - Hermione was virtually living with him, she said. Ron was slightly ashamed of the fact that he had gone and run a background check on Stephen at the Ministry, but it had come up with nothing against him. He should be glad she had found someone nice - Ron had had a series of easy-going, friendly relationships with girlfriends in the last six years, but he had never cared enough about any of them to stop putting his work first, so they hadn't lasted very long.

Grabbing a cardboard cup of coffee from a stall on the station concourse, Ron pushed through the crowds of Muggles and looked up at the blue screens to find out which platform the Devon train was leaving from. Tomorrow - the day of the wedding itself - there was a wizard express special running down to Devon, bringing many guests - but Ron wanted to be there tonight for the party. Besides, he was the best man. "Who else would I ask?" Harry had said, smiling, and they

had both laughed a little, thinking way back to the day they had met, on platform nine-and-three-quarters at King's Cross.

Today, as the train slid out from platform two, Ron sat amidst the Muggles and thought about what Harry had said then; and what the C.E.O. had said this morning. And he wondered what he would find to say to Hermione in a few hours' time.

The train gathered speed, and headed west in the mid-day sunshine.

End of Part 3. Coming soon in Part 4, the pre-wedding party takes place, but will all go smoothly?

(I think I'll dedicate this story to all the times I've arrived at Paddington station looking forward to catching a train out of London...And to my good friends who live in Ottery St Mary, Devon - going there in 2 weeks!)

4. Default Chapter Title

Summary: Ron arrives, and it's time for the pre-wedding party, but all is not well...

Disclaimer: These characters belong to JK Rowling, except for a couple I've added.

Author's Notes: This story has seven chapters: 1. Harry 2. Hermione 3. Ron 4. The Party 5. The Danger. 6. The Long Night. 7. The Dawn. I'm doing alternating POVs so chapter 4 will be mostly Harry's POV again, 5 will be Hermione, 6 Ron and 7 Harry again. Got it? Good, because I'm confusing myself here! Thank you for the great feedback, it helps to make the next part flow a bit easier! This chapter is the longest so far...

Part 4: The Party.

Harry followed Charlie Weasley into the kitchen, a bottle of wine tucked under each arm. "Will this be enough?" he asked, setting them down beside the bottles already arranged in rows under the wooden table, which was groaning with plates of party food. Mrs. Weasley had been busy preparing it, although she had agreed to hire caterers for the reception after the wedding.

"Yeah, we can leave it at that for now." Charlie straightened up. "Anything else that needs doing, Mum?"

"Anything *else*?" Mrs. Weasley snapped at her tall son, sounding distracted. "You can go and help your father tidy up the garden and get rid of those gnomes again, you can move the cars to make more room for the guests to park in the yard, you can go and help Penelope cut more sandwiches in the larder, you can count the plates, you can _"

She paused for breath, and Charlie hastened to jump into the conversation. "OK, OK, I get the idea, there's still loads to do for the party. I'll go and help Dad in the garden." He went out through the passageway which led to the garden at the other side of the house.

"Oh, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, as she placed another plate of food on the table, "would you like to go upstairs and try on your suit, now that Arthur's collected it? It's hanging up in Ron's old room - his is there too."

"Yes, sure. What time do you think he'll get here?"

Mrs. Weasley looked resigned. "Knowing how Fred drives that car, probably any moment now. The train should have got in about twenty minutes ago." As Harry moved to go upstairs, she called after him, "Don't go in Ginny's room, mind!" Ginny was currently upstairs trying on her dress, assisted by Hermione, Susan and Eliza, the over-excited five-year-old daughter of Charlie and Susan, who was going to be a bridesmaid. "It's bad luck for you to see her in the dress."

"I won't look," Harry promised, walking along the passageway and hurrying up the uneven staircase. As he passed the closed door of Ginny's room, he could hear laughter from inside, and Eliza shrieking with excitement. Harry grinned and continued up the stairs until he reached Ron's old bedroom right at the top of the house. He remembered the very first time he had seen this room - the twelve-year-old Ron had covered the shabby walls with posters of his favourite Quidditch team. Most of the Chudley Cannons souvenirs had gone now - Mrs. Weasley sometimes used this room for other guests - but there were quite a few of Ron's personal possessions still stored here, things he hadn't bothered to take to his London flat, like the dusty, empty fishtank on top of the wardrobe and the old Shooting Star propped in the corner which had been Ron's first broom. As Mrs. Weasley had said, two suits in protective covers were hanging on the wardrobe door.

Harry changed into his suit, ducking several times during the process to avoid hitting his head on the low, sloping roof, and then studied himself in the small mirror. The suit was not a bad fit, although he had to perform a small charm to adjust the sleeve length. He began to change back into the old clothes he had been wearing to help prepare for the party. As he was hanging up the jacket, Harry looked out of the small window. Below, he could see the Weasleys' rambling garden, and beyond that, fields, and the rooftops of Ottery St Catchpole in the distance, with more green hills beyond. Mr. Weasley and Charlie were moving amongst the gnarled trees in the garden, tidying it up. Harry knew Mrs. Weasley was hoping that the evening would be fine, so that the party guests could take their drinks and plates outside, making the small rooms of The Burrow less crowded.

Harry grinned as he watched Charlie conjuring the frogs out of the murky green pond and persuading them to wait on the grass while he charmed some of the algae and weeds out of their home. Mr. Weasley had finished working a few spells on the borders, which now bloomed impressively with brightly-coloured flowers. He had moved on and was now transforming tree stumps and stones into garden chairs for the guests. Harry grinned as he noticed the rather unusual chair covers - one was blue with silver stars, another covered in scarlet and gold zig-zags. Mr. Weasley was looking happily absorbed in the task, oblivious to the fact that the gnomes he had evicted from the garden earlier were sneaking back through the hedge behind him.

Harry remembered the first time he had met Ron and Ginny's father. He had been tall, thin and balding, with the remains of the red hair he

had passed down to all his children. Now, fourteen years later, the little hair he had left was grey, and his face was thinner and more lined. Retired now from his work at the Ministry, Mr. Weasley had been hit very hard by the loss of Bill, and although he and Mrs. Weasley now seemed happy enough in their daily lives, it had aged them both, and Harry knew they still felt the loss every day. They really enjoyed occasions like this wedding which provided the opportunity for a big family get-together, with all the remaining Weasley children coming home. They also doted on their grandchildren - Eliza, and the one-year-old twin boys belonging to Percy and Penelope, although Penelope had chosen to leave the twins with her parents this time so that she could help more with the wedding. Percy was arriving tomorrow morning, having explained solemnly that he could only be spared from his important work for one day.

Opening the window, Harry leaned out a little. The air was mild, and the new flowers in the garden were scenting the breeze. He could hear Charlie still talking softly to the frogs, clattering noises floating up from the kitchen, another distant squeal of excitement from Eliza, a low moan from the ghoul in the attic and the hum of a Muggle aeroplane crossing the sky far above. This began to be drowned out by a low rattling drone which seemed to be getting louder and louder. Harry recognised it as the distinctive death-rattle of Fred's sports car, which always sounded as though the engine was about to seize up. Craning his neck, he could see a rapidly-moving red blur between the hedges, coming uphill fast. Harry hurried to finish getting dressed, and, as he rose from tying his shoes, and looked out of the window again, he saw the old two-seater turning down the lane to The Burrow, gears crunching, with the red heads of Fred and Ron clearly visible before the car disappeared out of Harry's sight into the yard.

As he turned from the window, Harry thought he saw a flash, like sunlight on glass, from the field across the lane. He stared for a few seconds, but didn't see it again, and shrugged.

Harry hurried downstairs, banging on Ginny's door as he passed and calling, "Ron's here!", but not stopping to wait for an answer. The kitchen was empty now, and when Harry reached the yard Mrs. Weasley and Penelope were already out there, hugging Ron.

"OK, Mum, take it easy, you saw me two weeks ago! Hi Penny." He kissed his sister-in-law affectionately, then saw Harry approaching behind her. "Harry!"

"Ron, you made it!" They banged each other on the back in friendly fashion. "I was worried you would get called away at the last minute to deal with illegal elf-slavers in Cheshire or something."

"What, and miss out on the chance to be best man? Not likely!" Ron turned to pull his old rucksack from the rear seat of the car. "I have to make sure you turn up for the ceremony or Ginny will kill me with her bare hands. I can forget about any other Enforcing for the weekend."

Harry grinned at his lanky friend, thinking privately that he didn't look much like a law-enforcement officer at that moment, tousle-haired from the journey in an old leather jacket and jeans.

"Uncle Ron!" They both turned, to see Eliza racing out of the kitchen

door, her red pigtails flying, making a beeline for her youngest uncle.

"Hey, Lizzy!" Ron dropped his rucksack and caught her as she collided with his legs, picked her up and swung her around. Mrs. Weasley and Fred both laughed at her enthusiasm.

"Guess what, Uncle Ron, I'm going to be a bridesmaid and I'm going to wear a blue dress and have blue and white flowers in my hair and I've just been trying my dress on and it's got all net stuff underneath to make it stick out and I can do a twirl in it and I'll show you -" She paused to take a breath.

"Great," said Ron, putting her down. "Where're your mum and dad?"

"I'll go and get them!" Eliza pelted off around the side of the house, just as Ginny came out to join them, looking slightly dishevelled after getting changed in a hurry. Ron held out his hands to her.

"Hi Ginny. Ready for tomorrow then?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," she said, hugging him warmly. She exchanged a laughing look with Harry. "Really, it's all just an excuse to force you and Harry to wear suits."

"Oh, and there was I thinking it was just an excuse for you to wear a fancy dress," Ron retorted instantly.

"Hullo, Ron."

Harry turned, along with the others, to see Hermione standing quietly in the kitchen doorway. Like everyone else, Harry couldn't stop his gaze swivelling back towards Ron.

Ron had still been embracing Ginny when Hermione greeted him. Harry saw him remain absolutely still for a moment, before he gently released Ginny and looked over toward Hermione. "Hermione," he said, evenly and pleasantly. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks." Harry watched as his two friends took a couple of steps towards each other, looking as if they weren't sure how to greet one another under the circumstances - a hug? a handshake? neither? They settled on a quick, civilized, arms-length hug, before Hermione took a couple of steps backwards, distancing herself again. "Um - you look well, Ron," she said, glancing quickly up at him.

"You've cut your hair," Ron said abruptly, glancing at her in return.

Everyone else present suddenly realised they were listening in rather too obviously. "Shall we have a cup of tea before we get changed for the party?" Mrs. Weasley asked brightly. There was a murmur of agreement and they all moved towards the kitchen; Mrs. Weasley and Fred leading the way.

Harry walked behind Ron and Hermione, who were exchanging polite remarks without making eye contact. "How are your books going?"

"I've just finished one, actually. How's your work?"

"Good - it's good."

Harry sighed, thinking how sad it was that his two once-inseparable schoolfriends were now talking to each other like polite strangers. The doorway was narrow, and he hung back to let the others go in. Ginny touched his arm.

"I know what you're thinking," she murmured into his ear, nodding her head towards Ron. "Cheer up, at least they're both here *and* talking."

"Yeah." Harry gave her a crooked smile.

"Who knows, they might still make it up," Ginny continued in a low tone. "They used to make a cute couple, I thought."

"Don't start stirring, Ginny," Harry warned her. "Let's just try to keep everything friendly for the wedding." Ginny widened her eyes at him in mock-innocence. "Me? I won't interfere, I was only saying..."

"Mm. "

After a cup of tea in the kitchen, they split up and went to get ready for the party. Harry changed quickly and went in search of Ron. When he entered the little room, Ron was lying sprawled on his back on the bed, staring at the sloping ceiling, long legs stretched out comfortably. "You ready?"

"Um - no. Let me dig out a clean shirt." Ron swung his legs off the bed and fished in his rucksack. "Who's coming tonight?"

"Quite a few people. Remus is coming, of course - he's staying in the village. George sent an owl to say he'd been held up but he might make it before the end of the party."

"What about Neville?"

"Coming tomorrow morning on the Express with Minerva McGonagall and the rest of the Hogwarts people." Perched on the end of the bed, chatting about the guests as Ron changed his shirt, Harry didn't give another thought to the flash of light he had seen across the lane. Down in the lane, however, another conversation was taking place.

"Everything is in place, then. They are all here now. We will wait until there are plenty of people here. Then, you will mingle with the guests."

"And I wait for an opportunity to find Potter on his own?"

"Yes, then you give me the signal."

"What if he is never alone?"

"Then we'll have to use Plan B."

"And where do I leave the note?"

"Leave that to me. Come on, let's get out of here."

Twilight was falling as people started to arrive at The Burrow. Mrs. Weasley greeted the guests, wearing her second-best outfit - she was saving her best outfit for the wedding the next day. Ginny, now slightly nervous, but looking attractive in a green dress, was circulating among the guests and getting a lot of advice about married life from elderly relations. The rest of the Weasley family were taking turns to ferry food from kitchen to garden, and keep conversations going. The party was in full swing when Harry, going through to the garden in search of Ginny, met Ron coming the other way with empty plates in his hands, on his way back to the kitchen.

"The food's disappearing fast," said Ron. "Lucky Mum organized enough to feed an army."

"Have you seen Gin?"

Ron nodded his head back in the direction from which he had come.

"In the garden, trying to sound interested in Aunt Violet's jam recipes."

"Thanks. What about Hermione?"

"Don't know." Ron continued on his way.

Walking into the darkening garden, Harry saw Ginny, who was looking patient as she nodded agreement to Aunt Violet's advice. He rescued her by joining them and saying, "Sorry to interrupt - Ginny, your mum wants you urgently in the kitchen."

"So many things to remember when you're planning a wedding!" Aunt Violet cackled amicably. "Off you go, my dear." Ginny gave Harry a look of gratitude and disappeared into the crowd. Harry, fearing he was about to be left with Aunt Violet himself, grabbed the nearest passer-by, an old classmate of Ginny's.

"Colin! Just the man I wanted to see. Miss Weasley, Colin here works for the same paper I do - the "Daily Prophet". You should tell him your recipes, he could arrange to get them published in the cookery corner."

Colin, who was a news photographer on the "Prophet" and knew nothing about cookery, gave Harry a pained look, but didn't let his hero down. "So what do you like to cook, Miss Weasley?" he was saying politely as Harry left them.

Harry looked around him. Dozens of candles were burning in the flower borders, giving a flickering light to the gathering, but it was still quite hard to pick out individuals. Finally he saw Hermione, who was standing under a tree and chatting to Remus Lupin, the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts. She was wearing a dark red dress.

"Harry, it's been so good to have a chance to see you all again," Lupin said, a smile on his lined face as Harry joined them. Lupin was thin, with mostly grey hair, but looked better these days than he had years ago when Harry and Hermione had first met him. "I've just been telling Hermione I've never had a student as bright as she was, in the past eight years since I've been back teaching at Hogwarts."

"Are you just saying that to encourage me to take Minerva's offer?" Hermione teased him.

Lupin shrugged and smiled. "She wanted me to tell you, the offer's still open. I expect she'll try to persuade you herself when she comes tomorrow."

"I think you'd enjoy teaching, actually," Harry told Hermione. "Just think, your students would call you Professor Granger and moan about you like we used to moan about all the teachers - not you, of course, Remus," he added hastily.

"Well, I'm thinking about it," Hermione admitted. "I wanted to see the world first, but I've done a lot of exploring, and writing the books is becoming a bit routine. Maybe it is time for a new challenge."

"It would be good if you were at Hogwarts," Harry said. "With Ginny and me being in Hogsmeade most of the time, and you being in London, or abroad, we don't see you often enough. If you were at Hogwarts you could pop round and see us all the time. But, in the end, it depends whether you really want the job or not," he added.

"I'm thinking about it," Hermione said again, before she changed the subject. "How's Neville getting on? I must have a word with him when he comes tomorrow."

"He's fine," Lupin told her. "His Potions classes are very popular with the students. And of course, he's been a very good friend to me, making me my Wolfsbane Potion every month." Lupin glanced up at the dark night sky. "Still, it was thoughtful of you to arrange the wedding for a weekend with no moon - even though I should be all right with my Potion these days."

Half an hour later, Harry made his way through the crowd again, looking for Ron this time. He nodded and smiled at people who greeted him. There were quite a few people here he didn't know - distant relatives of the Weasleys, most of them. As he entered the house, he bumped into Susan.

"Have you seen Ron?" he asked her. Susan smiled, rolled her eyes and pointed upwards.

"He's reading Eliza a story. I put her to bed ages ago, but she kept jumping out again and demanding a story from Uncle Ron, so I sent him up there and made him promise to stay until he'd Enforced her to go to sleep!" They both laughed. "That was twenty minutes ago, and he hasn't come down yet..."

"Harry!" Fred Weasley called him over. He was holding the telephone to his ear. Mr. Weasley had been a happy man when he had persuaded Mrs. Weasley to install this Muggle invention some years ago, but she

had now got quite addicted to using it herself, mostly to talk to her children.

"Harry, could you do me a favour? Our sales rep Dave needs some information for tomorrow. Think I've left my notebook in the glove compartment of the car. Could you go and get it for me? Thanks a lot." Fred and George were the joint owners of their small wizard business selling jokes and tricks. They already employed six other people.

Harry went out into the yard. It was quiet out here, the party noise fading slightly. Everyone else was in the house, or in the garden on the other side of the house. Harry walked towards the little red sports car, enjoying the moment's peace. The top was open as usual, and he leaned inside to grope in the glove compartment for the notebook. He didn't hear the footsteps which crept towards him across the bare earth of the yard. He didn't see an exchange of nods. He did hear the sound of swishing fabric as an arm was raised behind him, but by then it was too late. Just as Harry straightened and turned to look, a crashing blow fell on the back of his head, and his world was suddenly black.

End of Part 4.

Oh no! Is the wedding in jeopardy? Stay tuned for Part 5 to find out. (Hermione's POV this time). By the way, can anyone think of good names for Percy and Penelope's twins? They're not very important to the story, it's just that my mind went blank on the subject. Hope you still care what happens next enough to read Part 6!

5. Default Chapter Title

Summary: Harry has disappeared from the party. Ron and Hermione are concerned...

Disclaimer: These characters belong to JK Rowling, except for a couple I've added.

Author's Notes: Thanks again for the great feedback. This chapter was really tough to write, and I changed it a lot, which explains why it took a few days to be posted. I like writing characters but I'm having trouble with plot, so please kindly ignore any gaping plot holes you may notice in the rest of the story. Also, I apologise in advance for Lupin acting rather densely - I think it would be more in character for him to be suspicious, really. Warning: not a lot of laughs in this part!

This story has seven parts: 1. Harry. 2. Hermione. 3. Ron. 4. The Party. 5. The Danger. 6. The Long Night. 7. The Dawn.

Part 5: The Danger.

"Hermione - have you seen Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Hermione turned from her contemplation of the way the candle reflections glimmered in the darkened surface of the pond. "Harry? No, not for a while. He was out here talking to me and Remus earlier but that must have been at least an hour ago." She peered at her watch in the flickering light. It was eleven o'clock.

"Well, I wonder where he's got to? Molly wanted to propose a toast to him and Ginny before people start leaving - it's getting late."

"Yes, we can't party all night with the wedding to brace ourselves for - shame!" said Fred, materializing next to his father.

"Shall I go and look for Harry?" Hermione offered. "He's probably in the house."

"I asked him to get something from the car at one point," Fred said, "but he didn't come back to me - I think someone must have distracted him - you know how difficult it is to escape from all these old grannies." He lowered his voice on the last few words, and looked nervously behind him as if expecting Aunt Violet to pop up.

"I'll go and find him," said Hermione.

She left them standing by the pond, and made her way through the crowded garden, quite glad of an excuse not to have to make conversation. She had found, and enjoyed talking to, a few old friends tonight, but she had never enjoyed making small-talk in a gathering full of strangers. Besides, being back at The Burrow after so long was bringing back some powerful memories, and she would be quite glad of the chance to reflect in her room at bedtime, and regroup for the next day's socializing.

Harry wasn't one of the chattering group at the top of the garden, nor was he in the sitting-room, where Mrs. Weasley was describing flower arrangements and menus for tomorrow in great detail to assembled female relatives. Hermione walked along the narrow passageway which served for a hall, looking into rooms as she passed, but there was no sign of Harry. She glanced into the kitchen, but it was empty. Thinking that he might have gone upstairs, she turned at the foot of the stairs to go up, but stopped when she saw Ron and Lupin sitting on the fourth step up, plates and glasses on the step next to them, obviously having a comfortable chat. They both looked up as Hermione appeared, and stopped talking.

"Have you seen Harry?" she asked.

Lupin shook his head. "Not since he was talking to you and me in the garden earlier." He glanced at Ron, who also shook his head.

"No - haven't seen him since I came downstairs from tucking Eliza in, and that was about an hour? three-quarters of an hour? ago at least."

"Your mum wants to do a toast for Harry and Ginny, but we can't find him," said Hermione. "I've looked all over the ground floor, I thought he might be upstairs."

"Well, we've been sitting here for a little while and he hasn't gone up past us," Lupin said. "Perhaps he's out in the yard, talking to someone? Or he's gone for a stroll? I can understand him wanting to escape from the throng for a bit - this was about the only place Ron and I could find for a quiet chat."

"Sorry - I'm interrupting you -" Hermione said, beginning to back

away.

"No, don't be silly, you're not one of the people we're trying to avoid!" Lupin said, laughing. Ron, who was looking carefully at his plate and selecting a sandwich, didn't say anything. "I was just trying to get Ron to tell me a few M.L.E.S. secrets, but he's being discreet."

"Well - I'll just go and have another look for Harry - maybe I missed him, or maybe you're right and he's out in the yard," said Hermione.

Frowning slightly, she walked through the passageway into the kitchen again, passing the mirror on the mantelpiece, which said sleepily, "Lovely dress, dear, but you've got a smut on your chin." Hermione half-smiled, rubbed the dirty mark off with her finger, and went out through the kitchen door. The light from the open door streamed out into the dark yard and shone on the waiting parked cars. There was no sign of anyone out here. The hedges of the lane were rustling slightly in the night breeze, but there were no other sounds except for the party noises coming from the house and garden behind her.

Hermione walked over to Fred's old sports car, gently touching the rust patches on the bonnet and thinking about the past again. To celebrate the first time Harry played for the Hogsmeade Hurricanes, Ron had borrowed this car from Fred and driven her to watch the match. Afterwards, the three of them had all squashed into it to drive to the victory party at the Three Broomsticks, and when the party finally finished they had driven to the highest hill they could find to watch the sun rise and talk about all the things they were going to achieve...

Well, between the three of them, she thought, they had achieved quite a lot so far, and yet it hadn't worked out at all as they had planned...

A sudden flurry of feathers near her head startled her, and she jumped slightly as a brown owl swooped down and landed on the bonnet of the car next to her hand. Hermione reached out to take the folded paper it was carrying, and as soon as she had done so, the owl took off again, and swooped away into the darkness. Raising her eyebrows, Hermione unfolded the paper.

"Don't worry about me, I met an old friend and went for a walk. We've decided to go for a few drinks in the village. Don't wait up for me, I'll see you in the morning. Harry."

Hermione frowned, and read the message again.

"You haven't found him yet, then?" said a voice from the lighted doorway. Lupin had followed her, and stood there with Ron just behind him.

"Um - no. But an owl just brought this," said Hermione, walking to meet them and holding out the paper. "It's from Harry - but it seems a bit strange."

"Why?" Ron held out his hand and she gave him the paper. He also frowned when he had read it. "That's weird."

"Yes - it's not like Harry to walk out on a party your parents are giving for him and Ginny," Hermione agreed. "Still, it is his writing."

"Perhaps he just wanted a break from all the family stuff - last night of freedom and all that?" suggested Lupin. "It's been known to happen!"

"Yes," said Ron, still frowning over the note.

"Shall I go and explain to your mum?" Hermione asked. "And Ginny, of course."

"OK," Ron said absently, looking from the note to the darkened yard and back again.

Lupin and Hermione turned to go back through the house, but Ron didn't follow them. "I'm sure he'll be back in time for breakfast - a bit hungover, perhaps," Lupin said encouragingly. "After all, he says 'don't worry'."

"Yes."

Mrs. Weasley was a trifle put-out when Hermione told her about Harry's abrupt departure. However, Mr. Weasley and Fred were both inclined to smooth the matter over.

"Now Molly, the poor boy's been putting up with all these relations all evening, and he'll be seeing them all again at the wedding reception tomorrow," Mr. Weasley told her. "Let him have a few hours off."

"Surprised he didn't invite Ron to go along for the drinks too," Fred said with a grin. "That's what a best man's supposed to do, after all - get legless with the groom the night before the wedding." For this he received a look from his mother which reminded him of being fifteen again.

There was another distraction a few minutes later, when George Weasley sent an owl to say that he would be further delayed and would come down in the morning, as Percy was doing, in time for the wedding. Then the party began to break up, starting with the more elderly aunts and cousins, who decided they should go back to the various places where they were staying overnight, in order to get some sleep before the excitements of the next day. Gradually the guests drifted away, with thanks and encouraging remarks about how much they were looking forward to the wedding. Mrs. Weasley bustled off to check for the last time that all shirts were ironed, dresses hanging up, shoes cleaned and everyone's accessories sorted out ready for the morning.

Hermione and Ginny were sent out to check that all the empty glasses and plates had been collected from the garden, when everyone had gone. To Hermione's slight surprise, Ginny seemed fairly resigned to Harry's disappearance. When she had read the note, she had sighed, and then said, "I didn't think Harry was minding all the fuss *that* much - well, I suppose he's entitled to his last night of freedom. I wonder which old friend he means?"

"I've no idea," Hermione said, stacking three plates together.

"Funny he didn't say who. Anyway, I suppose it's all right, but I'll kill him if he's too bleary-eyed tomorrow morning. Or if he doesn't get back in time for breakfast!"

"That wouldn't be very like him, though," Hermione said reasonably.

"No, I know." Ginny flashed her a quick smile. "I've no real fear of being left waiting for him at the wedding!"

"Ginny! Hermione!" Mrs. Weasley was standing at the top of the garden. "We're all going to bed now. It's late, and we've got a big day tomorrow. You need your sleep Ginny, you don't want to be too tired to enjoy the day."

"All right Mum, I'm coming," Ginny called back, pulling a little face at Hermione. They trudged towards the house, carrying their trays of plates and glasses.

Half an hour later, the house was almost in darkness, as everyone settled down for the night. Mrs. Weasley had left a lamp burning in the kitchen, for Harry's return. Alone in the little room she had been given, Hermione took off her red dress and hung it up. She had washed and was just about to go to bed when she took a last look out of the little window, drawing aside the curtain as she had the night before. She looked out into the darkness, where the black sky was broken by the lumps of blacker trees and bushes, and remembered the flash of light she had seen the previous night.

"What was that?" she thought, startled again as a dark shape whirred across the sky in front of her. It looked like another owl, and it had come from the direction of the kitchen, downstairs. The owl soared away and disappeared. Was it merely flying past, or had someone downstairs just sent it off with a message? But everyone had gone to bed, hadn't they? Hermione looked from the window to her bed, deciding whether to ignore it or go and investigate. Curiosity, coupled with a faint prickling of unease, won. She pulled on trousers and a fleece, and hurried into socks and trainers. As she crept downstairs, there was no noise from any of the rooms she passed. Even the nightlight burning for Eliza in Susan and Charlie's room had gone out. But, as Hermione neared the foot of the twisting staircase, and the dim glow from the lamp in the kitchen grew slightly brighter, she heard soft noises from the kitchen, as if someone was moving about in there.

"Harry?" she whispered, pushing the door open and stepping into the room.

But it wasn't Harry, it was Ron. Like her, he was dressed in comfortable outdoor clothes, with his jacket on. He was sitting on one of the kitchen chairs, bending his head down to tie the lace of one of his boots, but as she spoke he looked up suddenly.

"No, he's not back," he replied, in the same low tones.

There was a moment's pause, before Hermione indicated his boots. "Where are you going?"

He answered her with another question. "Why are you down here?"

"I saw an owl going off - I wondered if someone was down here and had sent one," said Hermione, quietly pulling out a chair for herself and sitting down opposite him at the wooden table. "Did you?"

He nodded. "To some M.L.E.S. people."

"Oh. Work."

"Sort of." Ron bent down again to finish tying his other boot. Hermione looked at his bowed head for a moment. He was a little older, a little tougher-looking, but the long nose and long eyelashes were still the same, and the ruffled red hair, and the look of concentration - but the Ron who sat here now had seen and done a lot more than the Ron she remembered. How much had he really changed, she wondered.

"Where are you going?" she asked again.

"To look for Harry."

"You think there's something wrong?" she asked quickly. "I wondered too - it really isn't like him to go off like that - and who's he gone with?"

"I don't know. Something's wrong. He would have told us, or Ginny - not just written a note."

"I think so too. What can we do?" She leaned forward, suddenly wondering how long it had been since she had used the word "we" in connection with herself and Ron.

"I was going to check the village, then - if I can't find him - there are four agents stationed in Exeter, I've just sent a message to let them know I might need their help. Don't want to wake the house and get everyone in a panic until I know there's definitely a problem..." He trailed off.

"He could be in danger," Hermione murmured. "Goodness knows there are probably enough people out there who still have a grudge against him. But for anything to happen the night before the wedding..." She paused, as she remembered something. "Ron - I don't know if it's relevant or not, but I ought to tell you something."

"What?" He looked up at her.

"Yesterday, when I came here, I found a map of the house on the ground, out in the yard. I didn't think anything of it, but I suppose someone might have drawn it if they were planning to do something to Harry."

"Where is it?" he asked sharply.

"In my coat, I think. Hang on." She got up quickly and went out to the coat-hooks in the passageway. Feeling in her coat pocket, she felt the paper crackle, and drew it out. When she handed it to Ron, he scanned it rapidly.

"Someone could have drawn this if they were staking out the house," he muttered, frowning.

"I saw something else -" Hermione hesitated. "I saw a light in the field across the lane, last night - like a torch or a cigarette lighter, just a flash. Someone could have been watching the house - or it could have been nothing."

"Damn. I wish I'd known." Ron pushed his chair back impatiently. "I don't like this at all. I'm going down to the village to see if he's in the pub - but I'm afraid he won't be." He took the keys off the hook by the door and unlocked the door as quietly as he could. Hermione followed him as he opened the door gently and stepped out into the dark yard.

"It'll be quicker if I take Fred's car," Ron said in low tones. "The only trouble is, it's a bit noticeable - if I do run into anyone -"

"We can take mine," Hermione said in his ear.

"We?"

"You don't think I'm staying here while you go and look for Harry, do you?"

He looked at her, his expression hard to read in the darkness, and for a moment she thought he was going to argue with her, like old times, but instead he shrugged resignedly. Hermione felt in her pocket for her wand, then pulled the kitchen door softly shut and led the way to her little car. Ron folded himself into the cramped space of the passenger seat, looking uncomfortable but not complaining aloud. Hermione put a quick silence spell on the car as she started it, which meant that all sound was cut off for a few minutes. No curtains twitched or lights came on in the house as the car rolled slowly out of the gate. A hundred yards down the lane, Hermione took off the silence spell, and their ears popped as sounds returned.

They did not speak until they reached the village. The tiny main street was deserted, and the only lights came from the pub on the corner, where it was nearly closing time. Hermione followed Ron as they got out of the car and pushed open the pub's heavy door. The bar was almost deserted - a couple of elderly men - Muggles - were playing draughts in a corner, and a middle-aged man was sitting on a stool nursing a half-pint of bitter and chatting to the landlady. Hermione dimly recognised both the man and the landlady as belonging to local wizarding families. The man was the local butcher. The landlady, a cosy-looking woman, nodded to Ron as they approached. "Ron Weasley, isn't it? Haven't seen you in here in a long time. What can I get you?"

"Sorry, this is official," Ron said tersely, reaching into his pocket and producing a small black box, which he held in his palm, and a leather wallet containing his M.L.E.S. badge, which he showed them discreetly, not attracting the attention of the two Muggles. "I take it you know Harry Potter?"

"Ooh, yes, of course," said the landlady. "Saw him just yesterday, shopping with your mum, Ron."

"Then you haven't seen him tonight?" Hermione asked quickly.

"Not a sign of him - I'd remember if Harry Potter came in, all right. Here, isn't it his wedding tomorrow? Maybe he's got cold feet -" She stopped laughing when she saw their serious faces. "Here - there's nothing seriously wrong is there?"

"Dora, if the Ministry's involved there must be something wrong," put in the butcher.

"Have you seen any strangers in the last few days?" Ron asked.

"Well, of course the village has been full of visitors - for the wedding," said Dora. "I know some of them, but others I don't know from Adam -"

"Those two blokes who were in here this afternoon," put in the butcher abruptly. "There was something a bit odd about them, I thought."

"What was that?"

"Well, they didn't look like they were here to have a good time at a wedding - kept arguing - the younger one was having a right go at the other one, I heard him telling him he was useless."

Hermione and Ron exchanged puzzled looks. "Can you describe them?" Ron asked urgently.

"Yeah - um - well, the younger one, he was about your age - not as tall as you, though, Ron. Skinny, very fair hair, moustache, sort of pointy nose, didn't like his expression. Sneaky-looking bloke."

"And the other one?" said Hermione.

"Ooh, well, he was a lot taller," said Dora. "And a bit older, about forty, maybe. He was fair too - big jaw, blue eyes. Good-looking chap, but seemed a bit slow on the uptake - kept giving me the wrong money for his drinks. The younger man kept grumbling at him." She paused, frowning. "You know, the older one looked familiar - like I'd have recognised his face a few years ago. Can't place him, though."

"Thanks, you've been very helpful," said Ron. "Listen - if you see either of those men again, or Harry Potter comes in tonight, will you send me an owl straightaway?"

"'Course. No problem." Dora gave them an affable wave as they turned to leave. "Hope you find your friend soon!" she called after them, as the door closed behind them.

Out in the dark street, Hermione leaned against the car and watched Ron checking the black box in his palm before pocketing it again. "What's that?" she asked.

"M.L.E.S. lie-detector," Ron told her, opening the car door. "They were telling the truth - Harry hasn't been here."

"So where is he?" Hermione asked aloud, more to the empty air than to Ron. "We've got to find him before tomorrow." She got into the car, where Ron was already sitting with a piece of parchment on his knee, scribbling a message. "Are you sending another message to the M.L.E.S. people in Exeter?"

"Yes. I want them here as soon as possible."

"Won't they have to stop whatever job they're doing in Exeter, though?"

Ron glanced across at her. "They're not on another job, they're my squad." He paused. "I'd better tell you - the C.E.O. called me in this morning. He wanted to warn me that they'd had reports of Dark Arts activity in this part of the world. He told me to keep a look-out for anything unusual - but I wasn't expecting Harry to disappear on us. I should have been more on the alert-"

"You weren't to know what they were planning -"

"No, but - Anyway, he told me to pick a squad and keep them handy in case I needed help, and now it looks like I do. Better go back to The Burrow and send an owl with this."

"Your C.E.O. must trust you, to put you in charge," Hermione said idly, leaning her chin on the steering wheel as Ron continued writing.

He cleared his throat, looking slightly embarrassed. "Uh - actually I'm in charge of a squad all the time. I'm a Grade Three Enforcer now - that's squad leader rank."

"Really?" Hermione asked, slightly surprised. She didn't remember Harry mentioning that. "Surely that's a pretty good thing to be by the age of 26, isn't it?"

Ron shrugged, folding his finished message carefully. "Well, most of them are older, yeah."

"You must be good at your job," she said, but he didn't reply; just sat waiting for her to start the engine and drive them back to The Burrow. It was quiet in the car as they made the short journey, but a few hundred yards from the sleeping house, Ron broke the silence.

"Did those descriptions of those two men remind you of anyone?"

Hermione flicked a quick look at him. "I was wondering, yes - what did you think?"

In the reflected light from the headlights, Ron's face was very serious. "I think Harry could be in more danger than we feared."

End of Part 5. So: who were those men? And what deadly danger is Harry in? (I promise, it's pretty fiendish!) Ron's POV in the next part.

6. Default Chapter Title

Summary: Ron and Hermione summon help to find Harry. Where is he, and can they rescue him in time for the wedding?

>
Disclaimer: These characters belong to JK Rowling, except for a couple I've added.

>
Author's Notes: See end. Lots of action in this part, though! I've rated it PG13 to err on the cautious side. Not that violent, but see if you can spot the suggestive remark...

>
This story has seven parts:

>1. Harry. 2. Hermione. 3. Ron. 4. The Party. 5. The Danger. 6. The Long Night. 7. The Dawn.

>Part 6: The Long Night.

>Ron checked the time again, tapping his fingers impatiently on the dashboard. They seemed to have been waiting in the lane for ages, although it couldn't have been more than half an hour since he had had the reply to his owl, telling him that his squad would be there as soon as possible. The other message he had sent, to London, had not been answered yet.

>"They've got better information at headquarters," he had told Hermione. "They can run a check on Malfoy and pinpoint places we might look for him."

>"That's if we're right, and it was Malfoy in the pub," Hermione said. "It did sound like him though - pointy nose and all!"

>"Yeah, though I didn't know he had a moustache now. Anyway, we should get the information back from London soon." Ron was silent again for a moment.

>"I wonder who's working with Malfoy." Hermione was leaning against the steering wheel again. They had parked just down the lane from The Burrow, hidden from the house by a tall Devon hedge, and were sitting in darkness, since Hermione had turned off the headlights. Shadows moved in the lane ahead of them, as a badger ambled across from hedge to hedge.

>"I'd forgotten how beautiful it was here," Hermione remarked suddenly. "It seems so long since I was down here -" She broke off, as though she hadn't meant to bring up memories of the reason why it had been so long since her last visit. Ron looked across at her. She was looking away from him, and he took the opportunity to study her. She looked more - polished - somehow, even in trousers and casual fleece. More poised. The mental picture he had carried in his mind for six years was slightly out of date. He liked her hair short - if they weren't now sitting in the dark, he knew he'd still be able to see the chestnut lights that shone in the brown locks, and he wondered if it still felt as soft to touch. Despite the awkwardness he had felt around her since he arrived, it felt quite natural, somehow, to be sitting here with her in the dark.

>"You know, it's ironic," he said abruptly. "Bill's death actually brought Harry and Ginny together in a way."

>She looked startled, he thought, though he couldn't see her face clearly. She was probably surprised that he had voluntarily mentioned Bill, since she knew how badly Bill's death had affected him.

"How?"

>"Well, they hadn't seen much of each other since Hogwarts. But after - Bill died, Harry came down here a lot, trying to make us feel better, I think."

>"I remember that."

>"Well, over the next year, he and Ginny saw a lot of each other, and that's when they became really close." Ron couldn't stop a smile,

despite the seriousness of the situation. "I can tell you, I was pretty chuffed last year when I found out Harry was finally planning to become my brother-in-law."

>"I can imagine." She looked round, jumpily. "What was that noise?"

>"They're here." Ron opened the car door quickly and got out. Four dark figures on broomsticks swept out of the sky and landed beside the car. They all wore dark robes, and hoods, but Ron was able to make out their faces. "Good, you found us." He turned to Hermione, who had also got out of the car. "This is my squad - Leander - Bernard - Ivan - Alexandra." They all nodded in greeting. He turned to them. "This is Hermione Granger."

>The M.L.E.S. people obviously knew Hermione's name, either from her involvement in the battle against Voldemort, or from her books. "Any more leads?" asked Ivan, who was stocky and dark-haired.

>"Not yet - ah!" An owl swooped down towards them. "This could be the answer from the Ministry." Ron read the message quickly. "The C.E.O. says if we don't notify him that we've found Harry by 5 a.m. he'll send down reinforcements in strength. And...well, what do you know?"

>"What?" Hermione demanded.

>"Apparently they've traced a hush-hush house purchase made by Draco Malfoy a few months ago - at Fairmile Cross - that's only a mile from here. He bought it under another name, so he obviously didn't want people to know he was around. The C.E.O. suggests looking there first."

>"Right. What are the orders?" asked Bernard, who was middle-aged, with thinning hair, and a red scar across one cheek from a close encounter with a griffin.

>Ron considered for a few seconds, before saying briskly, "We'll go in the car - I know exactly where it is. You follow on the broomsticks - stay with us."

>"Right you are." They mounted their broomsticks again, and Ron and Hermione returned to the car.

>As she started the car, Hermione remarked, "So, I get to see how the M.L.E.S. works from the inside. I suppose civilians aren't usually allowed on operations?"

>"No. But the C.E.O. knows your background. You're different." Driving, she smiled sideways at him, briefly, and he felt a weight lift from his shoulders. It was a long time since that smile had been directed at him.

>They drove rapidly towards Fairmile Cross, Ron giving brief directions at turnings - "Left here. Then right" - until they reached a small lane that appeared to be a dead end, with a five-barred gate at the end. "Stop here."
The broomsticks landed beside them again. They gathered together and Ron conducted a whispered meeting.

>
"The house is up that driveway. I can see some lights, so it looks like Malfoy's home, and hopefully not alone. Stay close, and we'll see if we can get a good viewpoint. I'll lead - Alex, Bernard, you bring up the rear, and keep a look out for guards or any kind of ambush."

>
They advanced stealthily through the gate, and up a drive lined by overgrown trees. Dim light from the house appeared and disappeared as the drive twisted and turned, but when they got to the edge of a rundown lawn, they could get a clear view. The house was old, and fairly small, with six windows at the front. Only two of the downstairs windows were lighted. Light leaked from gaps in the closed curtains. The peeling front door was firmly shut.

>
"There's probably a back door too," said Hermione softly.

"They're bound to notice if we go in at the front."

>
"That'll be our next resort if we can't get in by stealth," Ron told her. "Official Ministry raid." He beckoned the others closer.

"Alex and Bernard, you stay here, under cover, watch out for guards or anyone coming in or out at the front. Leander, Ivan, you scout round the right hand side of the house, see if you can hear anything or find another entrance. Hermione and I will go round to the left. If we don't find anything, we'll meet back here in ten minutes, and try the official approach."

>
The group split up, and Ron and Hermione walked quietly through the grass to the left-hand side of the house, where a window was lighted. Ron kept watch as Hermione squirmed in between the window and a shed, trying to see through one of the cracks in the curtains. "Can you see anything?"

>
"No, but there's someone in there - I can't see properly - people moving about," she breathed in frustration.

>
"Keep going." They moved silently along the wall to the rear corner of the house, and found a back door, behind which there seemed to be no light. Ron tried the handle. It was locked.

>
Leander and Ivan appeared round the other corner of the house, and joined them. "Hermione and I will try to get in," Ron decided. "You stay here - if you hear a struggle, or if we're not out in ten minutes, come in after us and alert the other two." Leander and Ivan nodded.

>
"Alohomora," Hermione murmured, bringing back another vivid memory to Ron. The first time he had heard her say that...But the door was swinging open, revealing a darkened passageway. Ron lit a tiny light on the end of his wand, just enough to see where they were going, and they advanced carefully. The passageway seemed empty, but at the end of it was a door with light shining underneath it - one of the occupied rooms. Beside the door was a tall cupboard.

>
As they drew closer to the door, Ron hoped fervently it would not open suddenly. He was quite prepared for a confrontation - confrontations were part of his job - but he wanted to find out more first, if he could, about who or what awaited them on the other side. He flattened himself against the wall by the door, and Hermione came up beside him. They both listened intently. From here they were able to make out voices. A man was mumbling something, but they couldn't make out the words. However, a sharper, louder voice answered him, a voice they both recognized instantly.

>
"Don't be stupid! He'll do it eventually - even famous Harry Potter wouldn't want everyone to think he'd run out on his wedding." There was a nasty sneer to the voice.

>
Ron's eyes met Hermione's, and they both mouthed the same word. "Malfoy!"

>
They listened further. "And what will your precious friends say, Potter? Weasley won't be happy that you ditched his sister - and what do you suppose his bosses at the Ministry will say when they find out the famous Harry Potter has vanished without a trace, right under his nose?"

>
Ron and Hermione exchanged another glance, before Ron felt enormously relieved to hear Harry's own voice answering, though sounding groggy.

>
"My friends trust me, Malfoy. Which is probably more than you can say about yours."

>
Ron could imagine the expression on Malfoy's face at that remark. There was a pause.

>
"Why doesn't Harry just blast him?" Hermione murmured, very softly. "He's a better wizard than Malfoy."

>
"They must have some sort of restraints on him," Ron murmured

back.

>
Malfoy's voice came again from inside the room. "I think it's time for another dose. Go and get it." The first voice murmured in agreement, and heavy footsteps headed for the door. Ron looked around for a hiding-place, threw open the door of the tall cupboard and beckoned Hermione urgently to get inside. Luckily, apart from a few cobwebs, the cupboard was empty, and there was room for them, though Ron couldn't stand up straight. They were only just in time. As Ron got the door shut, leaving a tiny crack through which he could see, the door of the lighted room opened. Footsteps passed them, and went along the passage, and they heard the man going upstairs.

>
"Did you see him?" Hermione whispered in Ron's ear.

>
Ron frowned. "Yeah, just a glimpse - I may be wrong, but it looked like - I think it was - Gilderoy Lockhart."

>
"Lockhart!" Hermione forgot herself and raised her voice in surprise.

>
"Sssh! Yeah, I haven't seen him for years, but it looked like him, only older, and a lot shabbier."

>
"He lost his memory," Hermione remembered. "Seamus told me the publishers had lost contact with him, that he'd gone down in the world - maybe Malfoy found him and used him as a stooge -" She broke off as they heard footsteps returning.

>
His eye pressed to the crack, Ron watched as the man went back into the room and closed the door. "Yep, it definitely is Lockhart. And he was carrying a bottle of some kind."

>
"We have to get in there and help Harry!"

>
Ron turned round, with difficulty in the cramped space of the cupboard. "Yeah, but we need the whole team. We have to go and tell the others what's happening. I think the coast is clear."

>
He pushed the door open cautiously, and let Hermione slip out of the cupboard first. As she passed him, a gleam of silver caught Ron's eye. Inside the neck of her fleece, she wore a necklace with a little silver cat hanging from it. He knew that cat, he had given it to her on her nineteenth birthday, the night they had first...And she was still wearing it. He did not say anything, but followed her down the passageway to the back door, suppressing an urge to break into a smile. Even if she was with this writer, Stephen, now, at least she still valued the memories...

>
Leander and Ivan were waiting alertly outside the back door. Ron explained quickly the location of the room they must target. "We've only heard Malfoy, Lockhart, and Harry, but there *could* be others in the house. And we don't know what weapons they have. This is what we'll do -"

>
Five minutes later, they had agreed on their plan. Alex and Bernard had been summoned, and given the job of watching the room from outside, and making sure no-one escaped through windows or front door. The other four were going inside to raid the lighted room. Ron, Leander and Ivan were going in first, "doing your Ministry stuff", as Hermione said, and she was going to go last, and check the passageway behind her to make sure no-one came to help Malfoy and Lockhart from another part of the house.

>
As they crept back down the passageway, they could hear raised voices inside the lighted room. It sounded as though Malfoy was getting to the end of his patience. Ron nodded to the others, raised his wand, and put his hand on the door handle. "One - two -"

>
He flung open the door, and they rushed into the room.

>
"MINISTRY OF MAGIC - THIS IS A RAID - STAY WHERE YOU ARE!"

>
There was a moment of frozen silence as the occupants of the room stared at each other. Ron took in the situation with a glance. Harry was bound to a chair, the right sleeve of his shirt rolled up, a bloodstained piece of cloth tied round his upper arm as a makeshift bandage. He blinked dazedly as his rescuers entered the room, not fully alert. He looked as if he had recently had a dose from the big green potion bottle on the table next to him. Beside the bottle was a bowl, half full of crimson liquid.

>
The big, fair man standing behind him, looking flabbergasted, was undoubtedly Gilderoy Lockhart, but with his dropping jaw, untidy hair and shabby robes he was a far cry from the dapper celebrity Ron and Hermione had known some fourteen years ago.

>
Draco Malfoy was standing by the windows, his face pale and his grey eyes blazing with hatred. His wand was in his hand, pointing at Harry.

>
"Put the wand down, Malfoy," Ron said evenly. "You're already facing kidnapping charges, don't make it worse for yourself."

>
"Kidnapping!" spat Malfoy, turning his wand towards Ron. "What's kidnapping compared to murder? He -" he jerked his head towards Harry - "he murdered my father!"

>
"That's not true!" Hermione's clear voice came from behind Ron. "Your father tried to kill Harry to stop him getting to Voldemort that day. What Harry did was in self-defence."

>
"All Harry did was to turn your father's own spell on him," Ron added, thinking back to that desperate day at Hogwarts, eight years ago. "You can't blame him for that."

>
Malfoy's face twisted. "He killed my father! The least he can do is bring him back!"

>
"Bring him back -?" Ron asked, not sure what Malfoy meant. He heard Hermione gasp behind him, but kept his eyes fixed on Malfoy's wand.

>
"That bowl - you were trying to make Harry do a Resurrection Charm?" Hermione said, sounding horrified. "That's terrible! I know you've suffered since your father's death, but -"

>
"Like you'd know about suffering, Granger - you haven't lost anyone," Malfoy hissed at her. "I know about you and your cosy little life, writing books -"

>
"Losing someone isn't an excuse for Dark Magic, Malfoy," Ron broke in coldly. "And I should know. My brother's dead, thanks to one of your lot, but I don't go around kidnapping people -" He broke off, controlling his temper with an effort, but, thanks to his training, managing it.

>
"I'm not doing it, Malfoy, I've told you," Harry said, sounding very groggy. "Give up -"

>
Malfoy gave him a look of hatred. "If you won't bring him back, you can join him, Potter!" And he raised his wand again, and muttered a curse. Ron, Leander and Ivan all spoke at once, blocking it before it could hit Harry. Furious, Malfoy spun and sent a green flash of power straight at Ron, but Ron jumped out of the way, and there was a loud sizzle of burning paint as the curse hit the wall behind him.

>
"I say, Malfoy, you can't *kill* them, they're from the Ministry," Lockhart said suddenly, looking confused.

>
Malfoy turned to snarl at his henchman, then turned to the long window and muttered a spell to dissolve the glass. But as he prepared to go through it, he saw Alex and Bernard outside, waiting for him, with grim expressions. He paused for a moment, just distracted enough for Ron to say,

>
"Expelliarmus!" He caught Malfoy's flying wand at the same moment as Leander and Ivan sent long, thin cords from the ends of their wands to wrap around Malfoy's body. He toppled to the floor, trapped, but still cursing loudly, until Ron put a swift silencing spell on him.

>
Lockhart chose that moment to try to make a run for it through the door. Hermione was ready for him, though, and blocked him with a quick Leglocker Curse. As he stood motionless, she proceeded to tie him up, helped by Ivan.

>
Ron looked down at Malfoy, whose eyes were full of helpless fury. "You really are an idiot, Malfoy," he said, thinking of various incidents from the past. "Alex - Bernard - I don't think there's anyone else around, but check the rest of the house and then report back here." When they had gone, he crossed the room towards Hermione, just in time to see her looking disgustedly at Lockhart as she tied his hands.

>
"To think I once had a crush on you," she was muttering. Ron grinned.

>
"What is a Resurrection Charm, anyway?" Ivan asked her.

>
Hermione looked serious. "It's very, very dangerous Dark Magic. To bring a murdered man back to life, you must force the person who killed them to speak the charm and stir the potion, and you also need a pint of that person's blood to add to the potion. I heard of it when I was travelling in Russia."

>
"Russia? That must have been interesting," Ivan remarked, tightening the cords on Lockhart's feet.

>
"Yes - I wrote a book about it, actually," Hermione told him.

>
"I know - I bought it," Ron said, startling her by appearing at her elbow.

>
"D-did you?" she said, sounding disconcerted. "Did you like it?"

>
"It was very good. I've got all your books," he admitted.

>
She coloured slightly, but didn't say anything, except "We'd better see how Harry is."

>
Leander had already freed Harry from his bonds, and was examining the wound on his arm. "He's lost a good bit of blood, but I think he'll be OK," he said, as Ron and Hermione joined him.

>
"Leander's got a special gift for healing," Ron explained to Hermione.

>
Hermione sniffed the green bottle. "Smells like a sedative draught. I suppose Malfoy wanted to keep Harry too drowsy to fight back."

>
"They knocked me out - when they got me -" Harry said, still sounding very hazy.

>
"He's got a nasty bump on the back of his head," Leander said, feeling Harry's scalp carefully.

>
Hermione sniffed the green bottle again. "Actually, it smells a lot like that sedative draught we made with Snape, back at Hogwarts. I wonder if Malfoy brewed it, or -"

>
"You think Snape might have been in on this too?" Ron said alertly. "He's been keeping a very low profile lately - the Ministry haven't had anything against him since he left Hogwarts -"

>
"I bet you won't be able to prove it, but it wouldn't surprise me if he was still supplying potions to Dark Arts types like Malfoy," Hermione said.

>
"Put the bottle in an evidence bag," Ron told Leander. He looked

at his watch. "It's nearly four o'clock. I'd better send a message to the C.E.O., tell him we've got Harry."

>
Harry struggled to sit up. "We've got to get back - Ginny - the wedding -" he muttered anxiously.

>
"Take it easy," Hermione reassured him, patting his shoulder.

"Ginny was asleep when we left, she wasn't worried yet. Malfoy forged a note from you."

>
Harry nodded, though he didn't really seem to be taking all this in.

>
"I hope he is going to be all right for the wedding," Ron said worriedly.

>
"He'll be fine in a few hours," Leander said, rebandaging the cut on Harry's arm, which he had managed to heal partially. "The sedative will have worn off by morning."

>
"Malfoy said - he'd keep me here till I agreed to do the charm -" Harry muttered, struggling to keep his eyes open.

>
Alexandra and Bernard arrived back to report that they had checked the rest of the house and it was empty, although they had found more bottles of various potions in an upstairs room, and some illegal Dark Arts paraphernalia.

>
Ron scribbled a quick note to the C.E.O., reporting that they had captured Malfoy and Lockhart, and asking for prisoner transport to be sent to Fairmile Cross as soon as possible. "Better keep them here till the Ministry people get here," he told Ivan. "I'll leave you in charge. Hermione and I have got to get Harry back to The Burrow now, before the rest of the family wakes up and starts worrying." Ivan nodded in agreement.

>
Hermione went to fetch the car from the lane, and drove it up to the front door. Between them, they managed to help Harry outside and into the front passenger seat, where he closed his eyes, looking as though he was about to pass out.

>
"Are you sure he'll be all right in a few hours?"

>
Leander nodded. "Yeah, with a bit of sleep. I've fixed the bump on his head." He turned and went back into the house to join the others, and the prisoners.

>
Hermione got out of the car, and tipped the driver's seat forward to let Ron climb into the back seat, since her car had no rear doors. He squashed himself in, and waited while she got in and slammed the door.

>
"So that's how the M.L.E.S. works," she said, turning the key in the ignition. "I wasn't expecting this weekend to be so exciting."

>
"Some sorts of excitement I can do without," Ron said behind her, as the car started bumping down the drive towards the gates. Glad of the cover of darkness, he thought of something he had been wondering, and asked suddenly, "Why didn't you bring Stephen with you?"

>
"What?"

>
"Stephen. The writer bloke Lavender said you were living with. I thought you would bring him with you to the wedding."

>
He couldn't see her face, but there was an odd note in her voice as she said, after a pause, "We broke up - I haven't seen him for two months."

>
"Oh." And I haven't seen you for six years, he thought, as the car gathered speed along the lane. What a waste of time, 'Mione, he thought, and wondered if it was too late to do anything about it.

>
End of Part 6.

>
Author's Notes:

>
I know someone called Hermione, and everyone calls her "Mione" for short (My-oh-nee, emphasis on My). I prefer it to Herm or Hermy as a "short".
>Anyway, only one more part to go, folks - what will happen on the wedding day itself? <p><p>

7. Default Chapter Title

Summary: It's the day of the wedding at last...will there be Happy Endings all round?

>
Disclaimer: These characters belong to JK Rowling, except for a couple I've added.

>
Author's Notes: Well, I feel guilty that Harry had such a bad time in Part 6 - knocked unconscious, drugged, victim of bloodletting by the deranged Malfoy...etc, etc. So the last part is going to be from Harry's POV, he deserves a break! WARNING! Slushy stuff ahead - well, it is a wedding, after all - hankies at the ready...

>
This story has seven parts:

>1. Harry. 2. Hermione. 3. Ron. 4. The Party. 5. The Danger. 6. The Long Night. 7. The Dawn.

>Part 7: The Dawn.

>"Harry!"

>Harry stirred, and groaned, trying to fight off the thick mists of drowsiness in his brain. His right arm felt curiously stiff and sore, too. Someone was shaking his shoulder.

>"Harry! Wake up!"

>It sounded like Hermione...Puzzled, Harry forced his eyes open. He saw in front of him the gloom of early dawn through a windscreen. Gradually, he realised that he was sitting in the front seat of Hermione's car, and that she was leaning over him anxiously.

>"Harry, we need to get into the house before anyone realises we've gone," she was saying. "Can you walk by yourself?"

>Can I? Harry asked himself, and made the effort to climb out of the car, stiffly and painfully. "Ouch!" He banged his arm on the car door, and staggered for a moment, still dozey.

>Someone caught his shoulders in a firm grip from behind and propped him up. "C'mon, get moving," Ron's voice said in his ear.

>"Where are we?" Harry asked, disorientated.

>Hermione, shutting the car door behind him, looked worried at this.

"At The Burrow. Do you remember what happened?"

>"Um..." It was coming back now. "I got knocked out...and when I woke up there was Malfoy ranting on about me killing his father, and...Lockhart was there too, I think...and they kept giving me stuff, some sort of sleeping draught...and then you rushed in with a load of other people I don't know..."

>"Yep, that's about it," Ron agreed, holding Harry's uninjured arm and manhandling him through the yard towards the kitchen door. The sky was still mostly dark, but the pink fingers of dawn were streaking the sky to the east. "We can fill in the details later. Right now, we need to get you into bed so you can get some sleep before this wedding."

>"Oh God!" Alarm bells were ringing in Harry's clouded brain. "Ginny - the wedding! What time is it?"

>"Twenty past four," said Hermione, opening the door for them. "So stop panicking. You can have at least two hours' sleep before anyone starts getting up."

>"And no one's missed us, including Mum and Ginny, I hope," said Ron, looking cautiously around as they entered the darkened kitchen. He breathed a sigh of relief as he steered Harry to a chair. "Nope, we seem to have got away with it. I was half expecting Mum to be waiting to brain me with a saucepan."

>"Let's hope that if they notice Harry looking a bit rough this morning, they put it down to his having been in the pub last night," said Hermione dryly.

>Harry blinked. The mists were starting to clear a bit now, and he looked puzzledly from one of his best friends to the other. The three of them being all together like this was giving him a powerful sense of déjà vu; a flashback to earlier days. "But what I don't understand is - how did you both come to be at Malfoy's place? And who were all those other people?"

>"M.L.E.S., like me," said Ron.

>"It's a long story, Harry," said Hermione. "All you need to know for now is that Malfoy and Lockhart are safely under guard, we're safely here, and you're pretty lucky to make it to your wedding day!"

>"We're going to have to tell Mum and Dad - and the others - about all this," Ron said quietly, "but I think we should leave it till after the wedding. Don't want to spoil the day or cause a panic about what might have been. They'll have to know in the end, though, - Malfoy's arrest will be all over the "Daily Prophet", and you'll have to make a statement, Harry."

>Harry and Hermione both nodded in agreement. "Ginny's going to be horrified when she finds out," said Harry. He yawned widely, rubbing the dark stubble on his jaw. "That stuff was powerful - I still feel half-asleep -"

>"Better get some rest, then," said Hermione, and they left the kitchen, heading for their bedrooms and a few hours' sleep. Harry pulled off his clothes, fell into bed and knew nothing but oblivion until Mrs. Weasley knocked on his door with a cup of tea at seven.

>"Morning, Harry!" She bustled over to draw the curtains. "Did you sleep well? What time did you get back from the village last night?"

>"Oh - er - quite late," Harry mumbled, his face still buried in his pillow. When she had gone, he got up, splashed cold water on his face, and felt much better, though he could have done with a few more hours' sleep, and his upper arm was still sore where Malfoy had taken blood.

>The whole family squashed into the kitchen for breakfast, wearing a motley assortment of dressing-gowns, T-shirts and shorts prior to changing into their wedding finery later. The only absentee was Ginny, who was being given breakfast in bed, since her mother considered this the bride's prerogative. Hermione was already at the table when Harry arrived, and she had managed to look surprisingly fresh considering how little sleep she had had. Ron came in a few minutes later, looking a little hollow-eyed. He was pounced on by Eliza, who dragged him to a chair next to her and opposite Hermione, before bombarding him with a torrent of talk about the wedding.

>Most of the Weasleys ate heartily, talking cheerfully about the plans for the day. Harry, still feeling the after-effects of the sleeping draught, only ate toast and nursed a cup of tea. He smiled as he watched Ron mustering up the energy to make token replies to Eliza's barrage of questions. Hermione passed Ron the marmalade, and he gave her a quick, tired smile. Harry made a mental note to get the full story of the night's events out of one of his friends later, now

that he was alert enough to take it in. He would still like to know how Ron and Hermione, who hadn't even been on speaking terms for the last six years, had come to team up to rescue him from Malfoy's house. Whatever had happened, they seemed to be on at least friendly terms again, for which Harry was deeply thankful. Having two of his best friends estranged for so long had been a definite strain.

>Other people's thoughts were obviously going along similar lines, because Mrs. Weasley stopped Harry later, in the passageway as he was on his way upstairs to dress for the wedding. "Did you have a talk with Ron and Hermione yesterday?" she asked.

>"Um - how do you mean?"

>"Well, I just wondered - last night at the party they hardly spoke to each other all evening, and this morning they seem to be quite friendly. Did something happen?"

>"Maybe they had a talk - I don't know anything about it, sorry," Harry said, escaping upstairs. As he reached the third landing, he paused outside Ginny's door. "Gin?"

>He heard the creak as she got out of bed, and footsteps padding to the door, before she said through the door, "Harry?"

>"Yeah. I won't come in, your mum has a bee in her bonnet about this bad luck thing. Are you OK?"

>She sounded as if she was smiling. "Yes, I'm fine. A few butterflies, but - I'm glad you're back, I was a bit worried when you disappeared last night, with only that note -"

>"I know. I'm sorry. I'll see you later, all right?"

>"All right."

>"And don't panic, OK? - everything will go according to plan - and I love you."

>"I love you too, but I just wish we were back home in Hogsmeade and all this hu-ha was over!"

>Harry laughed, and continued on his way upstairs.

>He had nearly finished putting on his suit, and was checking the mirror to make sure the bandage on his arm didn't show under his jacket, when there was a knock on his bedroom door. Ron sidled in, also mostly dressed, and fiddling unsuccessfully with his buttonhole, which he couldn't fix to his lapel. "How d'you feel now?" he asked.

>"Fine. Much better."

>"Well, you look pretty good for someone who's been up all night being kidnapped and bashed on the head," Ron admitted, throwing his buttonhole on a chair in defeat. He stared out of the window at the bustle of activity below in the yard - the caterers had arrived.

>There was another knock on the door. "Can I come in?" asked Hermione, before she entered. "Ginny asked me to check for her that you were both presentable. Harry, your tie's horribly crooked." She adjusted it deftly, then flicked at his unruly black hair, without much effect. "Yes, you look quite nice." She turned to Ron. "Where's your buttonhole?"

>Ron pointed to the chair. "The pin keeps falling out."

>"Give it here." She took the buttonhole and carefully pinned it into his lapel. Harry didn't miss the expression on Ron's face as he looked down at her head, bent in concentration over his jacket.

"There. Done it." She stood back to look at both of them. "You'll do," she said finally. "In fact, I don't think I've ever seen the two of you looking so smart."

>"You look gorgeous, Hermione," said Harry, surveying her in return. She was wearing a cream silk suit with a spray of flowers on her jacket and her brown hair shone. A bridesmaid's dress definitely

wouldn't have suited her so well.

>Ron didn't say anything, but Harry noticed the way he looked at her, before he realized what he was doing, and coughed. "Um - I exchanged some more communications with the C.E.O. before breakfast," he said. "Malfoy and Lockhart are now on their way to London under guard, and they'll be questioned there. I have to get back there tomorrow to make my report, and the C.E.O. would like both of you to make statements some time during the next week - as soon as it's convenient. Of course, you'll have to tell Ginny what happened first, Harry."

>"Yeah." Harry looked seriously at his two friends. "Listen, I still don't know the whole story, but I just want to say - thanks for rescuing me. If you hadn't come when you did - well, there might not be a wedding today at all."

>Ron shrugged, and grinned. "Just doing my job."

>"What, your job as an Enforcer?"

>"No, my job as your best man! It's my job to make sure the bridegroom turns up on time for the wedding, and I'm going to make damn certain you do!"

>They all had to laugh at that.

>"It was a lovely ceremony," Minerva McGonagall, the Headmistress of Hogwarts, told Harry several hours later, as they stood chatting at the wedding reception. Once again, the Weasleys' house and garden were thronged with people, this time in afternoon sunlight. Professor McGonagall had arrived, with Neville Longbottom and many other guests, on the express special that morning. "I hope you'll be very happy." She looked around at the scene. Everyone was now eating, chatting and dancing. Mrs. Weasley and her helpers were passing out pieces of cake, and Fred had taken control of the music. Harry had already had two dances with Ginny, who was now being spun round the garden by Percy, and putting a brave face on it as her toes were trampled on.

>"Thanks," said Harry. "I thought Ron's speech was very good - better than mine."

>"Oh no, you both did well," Professor McGonagall said, which Harry thought was some of the most effusive praise he had ever heard from her. "Ah - Miss Granger!" she added, as Hermione and Remus Lupin joined them. "I know this isn't really the time and place to mention it, but have you thought any more about my job offer?"

>Hermione smiled. "Yes, I have thought about it, and I think I *would* like to take the Transfiguration job in September - maybe it is time for a change. And I can still keep writing in my spare time, and travel in the holidays."

>"Excellent!" Professors McGonagall and Lupin both looked delighted at her decision.

>"That's great, 'Mione," said Harry. "Ginny and I will be back in Hogsmeade and we'll be able to see loads of you."

>"Well, teaching can't be any more hectic than coming here has been," Hermione said wryly. She turned to the two Hogwarts teachers. "You'll never guess how close this wedding came to disaster."

>"What do you mean?"

>"Never mind - you can read all about it in tomorrow's "Daily Prophet"," said Harry, puzzling them.

>Fred called, "Come on everyone! On your feet! Get dancing!" as a new tune began.

>Hermione turned to Harry. "Any chance of me getting to dance with the bridegroom?"

>"Go on then, you two," said Lupin, before adding softly to Harry, "But can I have a quiet word with you later on? I've got a present

for you." Harry nodded in slight surprise, and followed Hermione to find a clear space among the dancers.

>"Are you glad you came?" Harry asked her, as they began to dance.

>"Yes, I think so. I had second thoughts about coming, you know? - I thought it would be very difficult, being here after all this time, and seeing Ron, but I'm glad I came now," Hermione said, surprising him with her frankness, before she added, "I wouldn't really have wanted to miss your wedding, Harry."

>"You and Ron seem to be getting on a lot better now," Harry said carefully.

>"Yes, well, last night helped," Hermione said sheepishly. "Working together to get the better of Malfoy - well, it was quite like old times. And - and I'm glad Ron doesn't hate me any more."

>"I don't think he ever *hated* you, 'Mione."

>"No, well..." Hermione looked serious. "When I met him again, I thought he'd changed a lot, and he has, in some ways. His life revolves around his work, doesn't it? - but he's good at it. When I saw him organizing his squad last night, I suddenly thought about how good he used to be at chess - planning who should go where, how to attack and how to defend. It's the same sort of thing, isn't it?"

>"I suppose so," Harry agreed, intrigued by how deeply she had obviously been thinking about it.

>"I'm glad he enjoys his work. I suppose it helped him to forget about Bill's death and - and all that."

>"I think you've used your work to forget about other things too, these last few years, haven't you?" Harry asked her, steering her away from a bunch of his Hogsmeade Hurricanes team-mates, who were getting rather rowdy on Butterbeer.

>"Maybe." They both smiled as they looked across at Ron. After dancing with Susan, he had now been grabbed by Eliza, and he was picking her up and twirling her around in time to the music as she shrieked in delight.
"Anyway, I hope we can be friends again now," Hermione added.

>
"Perhaps you can be more than that, again?" Harry suggested. Hermione flushed, and looked down at her shoes.

>
"I don't know about that - it was a long time ago, Harry."

>
Harry said nothing more. When the music ended, Neville came to ask Hermione for a dance, and Harry went in search of Lupin. He found him indoors, having a quiet drink. "Ah, Harry." Lupin fumbled in his pockets. "I wanted to give you this when no one else was around." He handed over a small, rectangular package wrapped in tissue paper. "I know you already have a similar one in your album, but this one's rather nice, and I thought it would be a good thing to give you today."

>
Harry unwrapped the package. Inside a silver frame, backed with black velvet, was a wizard photograph of his parents' wedding. His parents, James and Lily, were waving and smiling from the frame. On one side of them stood the familiar figure of the late Albus Dumbledore; on the other side, two smiling young men, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black.

>
"I'm the only one of us who was able to be with you today, Harry," Lupin said gently, "but I know that James and Lily, and Sirius, and Albus, would all give you their love and best wishes if they were here."

>
Harry couldn't speak for a moment, and while he was trying to find words, Lupin added, "Today reminds me of that day very much - that was a very happy day, and so is this."

>
"Thanks, Remus," Harry said at last. "Ginny will love it." He smiled at his friend, took another long look at the old photograph, and tucked it into his inside jacket pocket before going slowly outside again into the garden. He walked towards Ron, who was sitting on the steps, a glass in one hand, having a quiet moment.

>
"Hey."

>
"Hey." Ron moved over to make room for Harry. "Everyone seems to be having a good time."

>
"Yeah." Harry's gaze searched for Ginny in the throng, and found her dancing with Colin Creevey. She had managed to get over her dislike of huge parties, and had looked radiantly happy all afternoon. Harry smiled, before turning back to Ron. "Not dancing?"

>
"I've just escaped from Aunt Violet," Ron explained, shuddering slightly.

>
Harry changed the subject. "Have you heard, Hermione's decided to teach at Hogwarts next September?"

>
"Has she?"

>
"Yes. So we'll be seeing a lot more of her, I hope." Harry paused, then went on, "I know you're always busy at work, but you know you're welcome to come and stay with us, whenever you want to - Ginny and I would like to see more of you, too."

>
"Yeah, I'd like to come to Hogsmeade sometimes - catch up with everybody," Ron said, his tone so expressionless that Harry couldn't tell if he was thinking of anyone in particular. Ron sipped his drink, screwed his eyes up against the sunshine, and ran a hand through his red hair, dishevelled again by this time. "I've got some leave time owing to me, as well - when I've finished writing reports on all this mess."

>
"Wonder what they'll do to Malfoy and Lockhart?"

>
Ron shrugged. "It's up to the Ministry. I'm going to get our specialists to test that sleeping draught, too - I'd love to prove Snape is supplying stuff to the Dark Arts circle, but I doubt I ever will."

>
"Oh, you never know, you might get lucky," Harry said encouragingly. He looked across at the dancers again, as the music changed. Charlie and Susan were dancing together now, keeping a watchful eye on Eliza as she "helped" her Uncle Fred with the music. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were dancing together too, looking a bit weary, but happy with the success of the day. George Weasley was twirling Professor McGonagall about, and, amazingly, she seemed to be enjoying it, although Remus Lupin was laughing at the sight as he danced with Penelope Weasley. Hermione had an long-suffering expression on her face as she was manhandled by Percy, who looked as though he was lecturing her on the latest important developments at the Ministry.

>
"Hermione seems to have fallen victim to Percy," Harry said. "I'd go and rescue her, but I have to go and find Ginny now," he added meaningly.

>
Ron put down his glass and rose to his feet. "All right, Harry, I can take a hint." Surprised, and rather pleased, Harry watched his friend weave a path through the throng until he reached Percy and Hermione. Ron tapped on his brother's shoulder, and Percy turned, said something, nodded politely to Hermione and took himself off, leaving Ron and Hermione together. Harry couldn't see Hermione's face, as her back was towards him, but he watched her put her hand on Ron's shoulder and tilt her face up to speak to him as he drew her into the dance.

>
"I wondered where you'd got to," said a new voice.

>
Ginny had come up behind Harry without him noticing. She leant against his back and put her arms around his waist from behind.

>
"Tired?" Harry asked her.

>
"A bit, but I'm still enjoying myself. Have you seen McGonagall dancing with George? It's a riot."

>
Harry twisted round to grin down at his wife. Ginny's red hair had been swept up on top of her head, and studded with flowers, but tendrils of hair were escaping and falling down past her cheek. Harry curled one wisp round his finger. "Actually, I was watching Ron."

>
Ginny looked past him, and raised one eyebrow as she gazed at Ron and Hermione, who weren't actually dancing much but seemed to be having a very engrossing conversation. "I was right, you know. They still make a cute couple."

>
"Just let them have some time to think things out," Harry warned her. "Don't go trying to play Cupid."

>
"I don't think I need to," Ginny said calmly. "Want some cake?"

>
THE END

>

>Or is it....? I really didn't mean to take this any further, but I'm now being bugged by questions. How will Hermione get on at Hogwarts? Will Ron and his heroic colleagues succeed in pinning anything on Snape? Will Malfoy evade Azkaban? Will the course of true love run smoothly? Oh no, I feel another story coming on...

>Anyway, hope you enjoyed this one. Please review - if there aren't any reviews I get depressed and think no one likes it!

End
file.